Resonances: The Sound of Performance

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What has happened is that I have become a listener
and the music has become something to hear.
John Cage, "Experimental Music"

It is a hot summer night in August 2013, as the audience gathers near the entrance of the large Gray Hall at the south side of the former coal mine Göttelborn (Germany). The sun has set, and there is only the gray light of dusk in the performance space inside, streaming through the large glass *façade,* falling onto a small array of stones laid out on the floor. Additional light from a video projector streams over the stones, and a tiny figure of a dancer is seen crawling over rocks, moving in the strange, a-syncopated rhythm of jump cuts. Slowly the sound of rocks scratching against a stone surface begins to be heard, it will remain the only sound for a while; then, Japanese instrumentalist Emi Watanabe steps into the empty space with her flute.

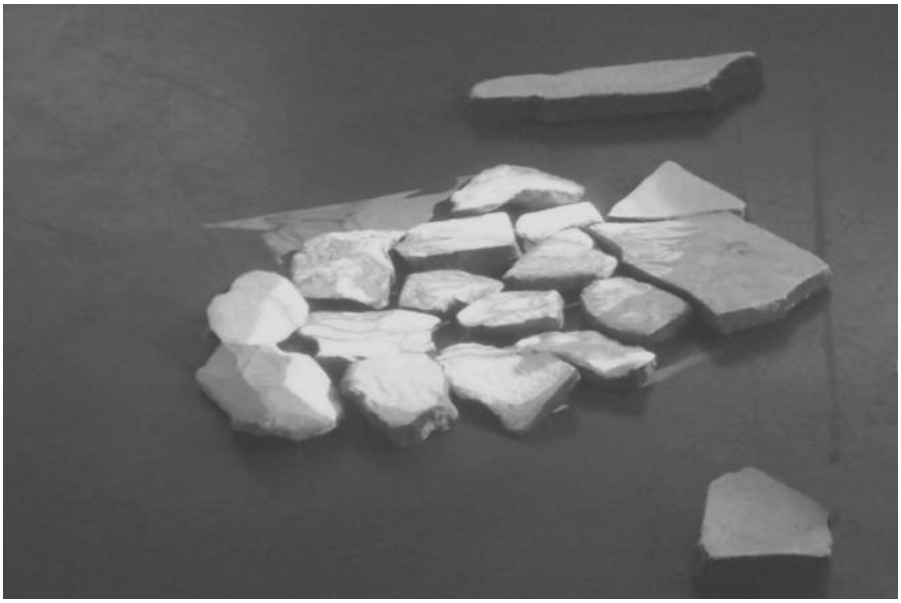

Fig. 1. Stone River, Installation by Vanessa Michielon, 2013 © Interaktionslabor

The digital material dissolves, as Watanabe, having placed her instrument on the floor, disassembles the rock-screen formation and spreads out the stones onto the wider stage; then, Vanessa Michielon joins her in a dance duet with the flute player, while visual artist Hayriye Koç Başara draws a series of watercolor stones onto paper, her drawing projected via live camera feed to the west wall of the building. The flute is picked up by a microphone and processed (via software) into a second, third, and fourth flute—an increasingly dissonant electronic sound/noise synthesis. Near the end of the duet, the dancer has re-assembled the stones into a diagonal line that crosses the space. On a structural level, one can think of the performance as a resonating improvisation that decomposes and recomposes both visual and sonic dimensions of this architecture. Throughout, the dancer listens to the flutes, the musician listens to the dancer, and the visual artist listens to both.

Fig. 2. Stone River, Installation-performance by Vanessa Michielon, Emi Watanabe, Hayriye Koç Başara. 2013 © Interaktionslabor

In the following, my comments on new theatre publications will emphasize both performance praxis as well as performance scholarship forming examples of contemporary reorientations regarding the nature of scores, "composed theatre," and live choreosonics in performance processes. These processes, even if they do not appear in print, but, for example, take place in workshops and laboratories and are recorded or streamed (filmed/disseminated on the net), constitute an important aspect of the kind of resonant theatre practices I want to draw attention to. My first example, therefore, refers to a *praxis* that seeks to locate the body in an environment to which the performer listens. Relating to surrounding

space is a crucial technique, or better perhaps, a philosophy that inspired Min Tanaka—on his farm in Japan's Yamanashi countryside—to originate a modality of working/living grounded in the idea of "body weather." The primary focus is on the intersections of the dancers' bodies and the environments they inhabit, with each body conceived as constantly changing, like the weather, in complex relationship to its surroundings and physical geographical details.

Chilean dancer Macarena Ortuzar, who lived and worked on Tanaka's farm, adopted her training into a movement practice that is fully immersing itself into a search for answers, as she calls it—answers to questions about that uncertain space between experience (exposure to the landscape) and performance (improvisation/choreography). Ortuzar thinks of this practice as a form of exposure to a resonating environment, almost as if her body pulses and vibrates in that space in which a part of the body moves to its limit, and, then, comes back to its normal physical state. Space moves and body moves, consonantly. The time and space in-between is the most intriguing dimension to her, where, actually, the body starts remembering *again* something that makes it move, coming alive at a second without thinking. In early November, Ortuzar conducts a Human Landscape workshop— "Dancing with the invisible"—in Bristol woods, followed by a performance at night within a sound installation.

Such exposure is tried out in particular surroundings, and the role of sound/ing has increasingly gained prominence. Performance researcher Marios Chatziprokopiou, currently based at Aberystwyth, told me in the spring of 2013 that he was to participate in a "Geopoetics" workshop on the remote volcanic island of Nisyros—in a laboratory exploring body, landscape, and contemporary Greek culture through the specific experience of moving through the natural and historical topographies of a place. The organizer of the Geopoetics, Anna Tzakou, claims that the search is for voice and movement in specific connection to a landscape that might be mythic or imaginary and in regard to issues of identity:

> We have been working in experiencing the landscape through body, in experiencing the notion of meeting (body-mind, me-other, me-landscape, group-landscape) with the intention of listening to the hidden stories occurring from being in open space. Improvisation both in sound and movement becomes the main investigational tool. The research is about inner and outer topography. Meeting is one of the main "techniques" in Grotowski's Paratheatre. At the end of each laboratory (on Aegina, 2012, and on Nisyros, 2013) there was a small presentation for witnesses, a kind of opening up of our working process. There has not been yet a clear performance project through the practice. This is my intention for the third project I am planning in my research. You are right, Anna Halprin's work has a therapeutic dimension, an eco-holistic side, and this has been a very clear outcome of the process. But I do not want to stay there. The bodily experience in the landscape is about understanding issues about identity and cultural heritage. And so far I have discovered that immigration is a basic topic. (Tzakou 2013).

Tzakou had studied body weather technique and thus is familiar with the Japanese relational aesthetic that grew from the butoh movement, and Chatziprokopiou provocatively shifts attention to the idea of being "ensounded" in a cultural landscape when suggesting that he plans to examine "contemporary performances of lament in Greece, in a cultural and historical setting in which ritual lament becomes a tradition that disappears, public mourning is censored, and some lives are not considered as worthy of being lived, and grieved" (Chatziprokopiou 2013). In the context of the current economic and political crisis, in the European Union and elsewhere, he is concerned about the loss of hearing in the forced or voluntary migration of voices, "the vocal materiality (within or beyond language) through which the performances I am looking at either refer to traditional lament rituals, or recreate new ways of mourning, as well as in a number of public performances in which silence becomes an active tool that undoes and/or recreates language" (Chatziprokopiou 2013).

If we ponder the recent uprisings and protests in Turkey, Brazil, Iran, Northern Africa, Greece, or Spain, a vast resonating political landscape opens out, signaling many bodies in crisis, ungrievable lives and unmourned griefs that are scattered. The increasing migrations reflect an enormous sense of precarity in the midst of economic crisis. This scattering worries me, as it cannot be recomposed into a theory or philosophy of contemporary theatre, no matter how hard writers (Badiou, Rancière, Manchev, et al) might try, since performance practice on the stage seems removed from revolutionary movements, or from a politically conscious critique of its marginal social position and precarious working conditions (see also Vujanović 127). A deliberate attempt to politicize "artistic labor in the age of austerity," as it was proposed by the Croatian journal *Frakcija,* is relatively rare, but Vujanović suggests that we can

> observe the emergence of a new understanding of politicality in art under the theories of immaterial work, biopolitical thought, and cultural initiatives related to digital technologies, primarily the internet. In these frameworks, the issue of work has become the basic political question of contemporary Western society. . . . Moreover, in the framework of digital and internet culture, numerous new-leftist practices have emerged, from free software and open source through hacker activism, piracy, and gift economy, to copyleft and creative commons licencing, which have also compelled the artists to (re)direct their political attention to the protocols and procedures of their own work. Thus the questions related to the technologies of authorship, the principles of sharing and exchange, knowledge production, distribution and access, various forms of cooperation, models of organization and decision making, licencing of artworks etc. have been raised in the performing arts during the last decade—moreover, as political issues, rather than merely or "purely" production-related ones. (125)

From this perspective, Matthias Rebstock and David Roesner's new book, *Composed Theatre. Aesthetics, Practices, Processes* (2012), must be considered a valuable investigation of compositional principles drawn from music and applied

to theatrical performance, as organizational methods of theatrical thinking and collaborative, transmedial creation move to the foreground of performance-making that owes much of its inspiration to John Cage and the Fluxus/Happening movement of the (politically) vibrant 1960s. The main feature of the book is its emphasis on processes of practitioners, collecting a range of voices and viewpoints providing often quite fascinating insights into issues of improvisation (George Rodosthenous), the hearing of voices (Nicholas Till), un-structured composition for speech, sound and objects (Michael Hirsch), the creation of hearing/the hearable (Petra Maria Meyer), which stretch from Artaud's poetics of the stage to some of the works mentioned here: Heiner Goebbels's *Die Wiederholung/The Repetition*, Pina Bausch's *Bluebeard,* Johanna Dombois's 3D virtual reality visualizaton of music, or Demetris Zavros's decompositions of myth and music in his "rhizomatic performance" of choral multiplicities in *Metaxi ALogon.*

The book tends to privilege experimental praxis in Germany (ten out of the fourteen contributors are German) and Britain. Perhaps some of the objects of its study—Schoenberg, Cage, and Stockhausen apart—may not be overly familiar names to many readers even though Rebstock's opening chapter on "Composed Theatre: Mapping the Field" extensively reviews familiar twentieth century sonic and postdramatic developments, especially noting Hans-Thies Lehmann's observations on the "musicalization of theatre" (qtd. in Rebstock 45). This musicalization, parallel to the "theatricalization of music," is a key concept for the *acoustic turn* that the editors, and contributor Petra Maria Meyer, see in the world of dance, music theatre, and theatre. Even if the focus is Eurocentric, one can think of reading *Composed Theatre* as an exercise in listening to broader critical issues, challenging us to re-think a tradition of experimental music and performance art through a careful parsing of ideas; ideas that, arguably, are still not fully understood nor embraced, if we remember Cage's insistence on indeterminacy and the absence of intentionality:

> Where, on the other hand, attention moves towards the observation and audition of many things at once, including those that are environmental—becomes, that is, inclusive rather than exclusive—no question of making, in the sense of forming understandable structures, can arise (one is a tourist), and here the word "experimental" is apt, providing it is understood not as descriptive of an act to be later judged in terms of success or failure, but simply as of an act the outcome of which is unknown. (qtd. in Rebstock 34)

Rebstock's introduction, and longer discussion of Cage's research on the phenomenal qualities of artistic, artificial or environmental materials, attempts a "mapping" of contemporary compositional thinking that derives its strength from the developing/creation process and the combination of different, non-hierarchical elements in the works that are presented. The vast majority of the book's sixteen chapters are written by practitioners, which is unusual for a publication that seldom shies away from complex discursive analysis and self-conscious reflections on art and poststructuralist theory (composer Demetris Zavros, in particular,

is evoking a Deleuzian language of "becoming" for his explanations of rhizomatic, de-territorialized hearing and the concept of the "dividual" for choric refrains).

To those working in contemporary hybrid and software-supported performance, much of terminology introduced here will not come as a surprise. The definitions offered for compositional processes and material organization draw on the principle of the simultaneity and non-hierarchy of the theatrical elements or, as Meyer suggests, a "multimedia structural principle" (89) of the temporal sequencing of acoustic events revealing a heightened awareness of phrasing, rhythm, intonation, and dynamic articulation, exemplified in similar ways by the forms that contribute to this discourse on composing. They range from "audible theatre" (Hirsch), "visible music" (Schnebel), or Hans-Joachim Hespos' "integral theatre," and Einar Schleef's "choral theatre," to Mauricio Kagel's method of composing with non-musical materials ("You can use sound materials. You can compose with actors, with cups, tables, busses, and oboes, and finally compose films" (qtd. in Rebstock 37)), Heiner Goebbels' "polyphony of the media and their contrapuntal functions" (114), Valère Novarina's "theatre des Oreilles," as well as the style of directors such a Robert Wilson, Christoph Marthaler, and Romeo Castellucci who "compose with the means of the stage" (30) and have an ear for the particular significance *of "aural semiotics"* (78). Applying to theatre the "semiotics of sound," Roland Quitt argues in an important chapter on contemporary art's ironic and distanced relationship to traditional and modern aesthetic codes, should imply that the performing arts, at this late stage, know full well that since Schönberg and Kandinsky "there has no longer been a fundamental aesthetic difference in terms of the artistic approach between music and other arts" (78).

What makes this book insightful for a reflection of new theatre in the twenty-first century is its historical contextualization of composed theatre as continuous with earlier performance experiments (after Cage and Fluxus, but also reaching back to the Bauhaus, Futurism, and Artaud) and its insistence on process, collaboration, and a redefinition of roles (composer, director, designer, performer, technician, etc), which demands a critique of the apparatus of conventional production and thus the political/economic determinants in the industry, but also the entire educational spectrum (universities) still widely based on disciplinary strands. Underpinned by the working methods they examine, the second and third parts of the book are all about "Processes and Practices," reflecting the manner in which the individual practitioners find and organize their performance material; portray the devising process, working conditions, and interaction with performers who are often crucial for the development (for example, how the "composing" evolves collaboratively through improvisation and iterative design); and invent directing strategies or generative assemblage modes that differ significantly in regard to whether scores, "proto-scores," "transcripts," subscores (in Cathie Boyd's *Optical Identity* and Nicholas Till's *Hearing Voices*), or no scores are used for the shaping of performative, sonic, visual, and technical

aspects. Till refers to his group's rehearsal process as a "critical practice" (186) that not only questions conventional operatic forms (and the subjectivity at work in operatic singing), but also specifically investigates new interactive audio-visual technologies through its provocative "multiplication" of performer and voice via the uncanny effects of voice technologies. The latter of course allow the "recording, transmission and imitation of disembodied voices" (Till 187), and Till, much like Goebbels in *The Repetition* and *Eraritjaritjaka,* disrupts common attitudes of listening by shifting attention to the sounding (of language), silence, and movement of acoustic material, as well as the montage of playback effects, repetitions, and projections. Goebbels "theatre machinery," Meyer suggests, "runs in no one particular direction but rather in various directions simultaneously" (98).

The circularity and polyphonic dimensions of such work that interlaces various events, as well as using a range of permutable elements—Jörg Laue, in his chapter ". . . To Gather Together What Exists in a Dispersed State . . . " calls his devising technique a form of "leaping" within a fundamentally constant *transformation process* (142)—constitute a language of compositional thinking that in all of the book's chapters highlights common features of "intermodality" (325). Part 3 offers additional "Portraits" of artists such as Georges Aperghis, Ruedi Häusermann, Daniel Ott, and Manos Tsangaris, followed by Part 4 ("Discussion and Debate: On Terminology, Planning and Intuition, Concepts and Processes, Self-Reflexivity and Communication"), and indeed lively debate characterizes the book's effort, not to label new genres of performance, as Roesner points out at the end, but to clarify "How we do it."

Noting that not all practitioners agree on intermodality and the integration of mutually dependent relationships of sound, movement, video, and lighting—Goebbels, for example, favors the "compositional *separation* of elements" (325), while Hirsch prefers the term "Konvolut" (128), and Tsangaris devises music-theatrical "molecules" for his site-specific and processional works—Roesner offers the book's findings as an incentive for further research into tendencies of compositional thinking. The questions he summarizes ("How do we understand what we do?"/ "Who do we work with and how?"/ "How is the working process different from other forms of theatre and music practice?"/ "What are the consequences of the above?" (Roesner 324)) resonate more forcefully when they are taken out of the tedious British context of "research-led practice" evoked by Till and conceded by Roesner who completed the book after workshops held at the Universities of Exeter and Hildesheim in 2009. The consequences of undermining the conventional notion of a composed score or music composition are of course obvious: the work can only be produced outside of the commoditized market and privately-funded or state-subsidized institutions that commission products. Throughout the book, even though some of the practitioners assembled here have become known and had their work performed, the ethos of process and experimental collaboration points back to the question of immaterial labor in the age of austerity, and within a western culture of the "post-medium object"

that Vujanović posits. Social and cultural codes still affect the reception of aesthetic objects; open source/digital culture has not yet managed to overcome the medium-specific tradition, even though Vujanović adheres to Bourriaud's paradigm of "postproduction," arguing that today's dominant protagonists are programmers and DJs whose coding, sampling, and remixing procedures are common processes of art production which they share with everyone (the users). I am not sure whether radically unconventional audio-visual installations, such as Goebbels's *Stifters Dinge,* can be shared, travel, and perform again to a wider range of audiences. When I saw it in London last year, I was struck by the overwhelming complexity of its material construction and engineering, and I anticipate it may end up as a collector's item in a museum. It is not clear how Roesner wants to argue that composed theatre, aware of the "dual thinking of acoustic and visual elements or aural and optical stages," actively seeks to "render this distinction obsolete, to 'ravish the senses' (Cryptic) into synaesthetic receptivity, hearing with the eyes and seeing with the ears" (325). It is true, much of contemporary sonic art does not need the theatre; it is already online and will be downloadable. On the other hand, the notion of the "experimental process," in the studio or on site, as it is celebrated and affirmed here, may require a closer scrutiny, since the book relies of course on artists' statements on their own work. Rodosthenous, for example, sums up his improvisation process by stating that:

> Improvising material for devised work is a unique and very rewarding process because it extracts material from the performers (who are actually performing the piece) and gives then joint ownership of the final creation. My improvisational process leads to a kind of collective in situ compositional process. Its musicality (the sense of musical structure and—to a degree—notation, of musical underscoring, of conducting, of musically approaching language) is what sets it apart from other techniques of improvisation in devised theatre (which may have little or nothing to do with musical composition). As with any piece of devised performance though, a crucial question remains unanswered: "who is ultimately the copyright owner of the work": the director, the dramaturge or the ensemble of performers itself? (181)

The question remains unanswered indeed. Rodosthenous, who is introduced as a composer and artistic director of the theatre company Altitude North, speaks of "conducting the body" (175); he, then, describes his process as developing "our material" dealing with live human bodies, but never mentions who these live human bodies are. Similarly, the "Portraits" of practitioners, in Part 3, focus on the key role of the performer as a creative contributor, emphasizing the presence of the personal within composed theatre, from the biographical origins of Ruedi Häusermann's inspiration to compose or his close collaboration with a string quartet on *Gewähltes Profil: Lautlos*, to Daniel Ott's deliberate working with the personalities and memories of his instrumentalists during the creation of *ojot*a (mixing sound and movement of walking in different shoes on different

paths). Ott's collaborators are introduced by name, and percussionist Christian Dierstein's walk in different shoes on changing surfaces underfoot is carefully explained, while Ott's more recent work seems preoccupied with theatrical qualities and sound ecologies of a particular landscape/location (harbour basin, ski-lift, railway viaduct, woods, etc.). Moving outside of the stage of composed theatre, Ott follows Cage's footsteps into the weather, into research and rehearsal "on location," first listening to how the landscape itself sounds without using any additional sounds, then probing possible linkages of instrumental improvisation to the (chance) events in nature. For *Hafenbecken I & II. Umschlagplatz klang* (2006), Ott investigated the Basel Rhine Harbour's acoustic environment for three years, developing ideas jointly with orchestra musicians involved in the project, and, eventually, "installed" live sounds or moving sound sources in seventeen stations around the harbour, inviting audiences to wander around between the different locations of with the "moving orchestra" (270). His installation here corresponds a little to the "Geopoetics" project I mentioned in the beginning.

Ott's situational approach seems to hover between openness (landscape as "installation"—"made up" sounds from nature) and structured instrumental performance (musicians respond with their own scenic ideas and sound improvisation). It remains *in situ*; he avoids capture of a sound into electro-acoustic or digital composition to be displaced into other spaces. It is not mentioned how the witnesses reacted to the environment-performance. The book strains to include this practice under the rubric of "composed theatre," but is correct in assuming that such a dramaturgy of co-composition uses filters and arrangements for the experience of sonic images, gestures, and occurrences in the landscape: a "staged, perceptual offer was created" (275). Here we also note the connection between Ott's practice and the questions raised by Tsangaris's resistance to writing scores and the conventions of (prescriptive) notation. In fact, Roesner argues, Tsangaris refers to John Cage when proposing that we should be inventing "new social models rather than reiterating established power structures. Many of the scoring and notation techniques described in the context of Composed Theatre display an active and critical engagement with the implicit politics of the score" (335).

Having claimed such differentiated working processes, and noticing an affinity of practitioners for venturing into new territories in areas of science and technology, Rebstock and Roesner still stop short of examining technological composablity, failing to address why Till might "cheat" certain technical effects of real-time interactivity, or whether real-time systems present a problem for composition,[1] for example when sounds that were not anticipated are triggered. Thus, they too are unable to enter into a dialogue with cultural theories of knowledge production or virtuosity under the regime of neoliberal capitalist economy. In conclusion, it would be interesting, to my mind, to take a particular aspect of

1. See also Jörg Lensing's comments on *Suite Intermediale* (163-67).

the book's theses on creating hearing and the hearable, and ask whether and how *performance*s, with any or some of the modalities and techniques in play—and with the notion of the "instrument" in particular—are equivalent or distinct, whether and why it makes a difference to work with trained dancers, actors, musicians, and audio-visual programmers. In Lensing's *Suite Intermediale,* the diagram for the technical setup describes the dance floor as an "electronic instrument," with cameras and microphones able to generate data to control lighting, sound, and video projections, but it is the ensemble (Lensing speaks of a mixture of dancers, actors, and musicians) that creates the input for the sensors, and this ensemble must rehearse the actions. To go back to my example of *Stone River* at the beginning, regardless of the action parameter (whether it is extensively rehearsed or spontaneously/continuously improvised), but, especially, if musical, acoustic, or electronic instruments and objects are used as well, the performative quality, and thus the form and content of the event, will depend on the performer's techniques. One can call the live process a composition, for sure, but in *Stone River* the audience witnesses a highly trained dancer and a highly trained musician interacting with an environment, microphones, and painting (by a painter). Similarly, if Ortuzar were to move with the invisible, in the coal mine, the woods, or the harbour, she would move with her dancer body/instrument and process the environment based on her subconscious knowledge of moving. Without interpreting the outcomes now, the live composing or the live synthesis are an artistic issue, not a political practice, even if Boyan Manchev believes the performing body is incalculable and can resist "standardized forms of subjectivity production" and the "codification and commodification of the body" (19).

I cannot say what one would see or experience; perhaps, Ortuzar would be an inconsonant figure in a ruined landscape, standing irreducibly apart. Perhaps, she would listen to inner resonances that are becoming the substance of her dance which we cannot hear. In that sense, Manchev might argue, she resists being predetermined (scored). The four performers just mentioned, namely, Macarena Ortuzar, Vanessa Michielon, Emi Watanable, and Hayriye KocBasara, are all freelance artists, like most of the named and unnamed performers in the book. In regard to the political resonances of their work, Vujanović contradicts Manchev, suggesting that the

> politicality of the performing arts, which structurally belongs to that system of production as part of the so-called tertiary sector [service industry], is not only indirect and weakened, but remains complicit until it shifts from being appellative to debating on politics and then to dealing with its own working conditions, which follow the performing arts as their "politically unconscious." (127)

Performance can only deal with these working conditions and the available modes of composition outlined in *Composed Theatre,* if it is not indifferent to both old or new protocols and the economic policy of the art world which instrumentalizes its collective knowledge to serve the foundations of the art system,

to recycle the social status of composition. Nowhere, yet, do we hear an urgent, common reflection on the public good, along the lines of John Cage's 1975 "Lecture on the Weather," in which he gave his scathing account of the misdirection of politics and society, drawn from Thoreau's "On Civil Disobedience."

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